

## **Domains and Precedents**

In remixing media to critique the use of language in advertising, my thesis project draws upon a rich history of political activism and artistic practice. As modern and postmodern scholars have developed theories about how meaning is constructed through language and image, artists and activists have developed techniques that can be used to communicate these ideas in compelling and provocative ways. Specifically, artistic techniques drawn from twentieth century modern art movements combined with newer approaches like information design and data visualization form a rich toolset that supports the critique of corporate power through an examination of language and meaning.

### **Dada and Neo-Dada: Avant-Garde Art Techniques**

"The strongest Dada impulses informing younger American and European artists of the 1950s were Duchamp's notion of the 'readymade'...and Schwitters's collage technique...More globally, the Neo-Dada artists' use of chance as a compositional method, their interest in performance and other ephemeral manifestation, and their challenges to the conventional exhibition, distribution, and commodification of art, reflect profound shifts effected by Dada in attitudes about making art." (Hapgood and Rittner, 64)

The early and middle twentieth century spawned a multitude of related and overlapping schools of thought in modern art, such as Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, and Fluxus. While these movements each had their own idiosyncratic approaches, they collectively popularized a number of techniques that I am applying in my thesis process, including collage or *détournement*, the use of text in visual art, and chance as a means of composition.

Collage is particularly relevant to my thesis in that the juxtaposition of decontextualized elements is inherently related to meaning and how meaning is constructed. This juxtaposition is an effective way of exposing the mechanics of how

meaning is constructed. Although collage was pioneered in artistic practice by Picasso and Braque near the turn of the century, the Situationists were the first to explicitly discuss this technique as a tool for political and social commentary. They stated that “the literary and artistic heritage of humanity should be used for partisan propaganda purposes” and proposed the technique of *détournement*, whereby existing visual elements are placed in new contexts, thereby creating new meaning: “Any elements, no matter where they are taken from, can be used to make new combinations...when two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed.” (Debord and Wolman). Thus the artist is no longer responsible for the craft of color, line, and shadow, but becomes an author and manipulator of meaning itself.

When image and text from advertising messages are used in collage, a double *détournement* occurs, since advertising already relies heavily on the juxtaposition of images, text, and symbolic elements to convey the desired message about a product. A contemporary artist who performs this double *détournement* in her work is Barbara Kruger. Kruger uses collage to reflect on advertising and cultural beliefs by pairing her own texts with imagery from advertisements in her signature black, white, and red color palette. Her work is effective in that the juxtaposition of text and image clearly critiques the messages of advertising and the way they perpetuate oppressive social situations. However, her messages can be a bit heavy handed. For example, in one piece, the words “Your body is a battleground” (fig. 01) are superimposed on an image of a woman’s face. Or in another, a photo of George W. Bush is paired with the words “Pro-Life for the Unborn. Pro-Death for the Born” (fig. 02). The didacticism of these messages makes the viewer feel as if (s)he is being told what to think rather than being encouraged to explore an idea. In my thesis project, I intend to create work that invites exploration and leaves room for the viewer to come to his/her own conclusions through active interpretation.

A defining element of Kruger’s work is her use of text and image together, another practice developed by modern artists that is essential to my thesis. The use of text in visual art exposes the nature of language as a symbolic system and encourages us to question how we understand words to have specific meaning. This can be achieved through the juxtaposition of text with image, such as in Barbara Kruger’s work or in Magritte’s famous work *The Wind and the Song* (fig. 03), where he painted a picture of a pipe with the words “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (this is not a pipe) below it.

However, the deconstruction of meaning can also be achieved through the use of text alone, where the text itself is the image. Russell Bowman states that:

"The forms in which words and language fragments are presented in visual formats are as various as the types of art, but they are united by the fact that the words serve to increase the image's potential for meaning. Whether the words underline and reinforce the image, essentially become the image, or contradict the image to achieve a telling ambiguity, the combination of the visual image with the visual sign system we know as language always creates a compelling resonance." (335)

Kay Rosen is a contemporary artist who utilizes text alone to create extraordinarily compelling pieces that reflect on language and meaning. Her works, which range from small canvasses to large-scale public billboards, consist entirely of words combined, separated, disemboweled, and manipulated to expose their inner multitudes of meaning. For example, her piece "Pendulum" (fig. 04) consists of the letters P-N-U-U-M-L-D-E shaped in an arc, forcing the viewer's eye to perform the action of a pendulum in order to read the word. Another work has the word "wish" in yellow followed by the word "dish" in red – it is entitled "Yellowish/Reddish" (fig. 05). A third piece is a billboard in Miami Beach that reads either "Miami Go Miami" or "Mi Amigo Miami" (fig. 06), depending on how you look at it. Rosen's work is compelling in a way that Kruger's is not because she doesn't state her messages explicitly, but through her art, the viewer is encouraged to look at language and words in a more exploratory and experimental manner. This is the kind of experience I intend to evoke in my thesis project, where the form of the piece encourages viewers to think more critically about the way advertising uses language to manipulate meaning and desire without telling them *what* to think about it.

The way I have chosen to remove my voice or message from my thesis project in order to create this type of experience is through the use of chance composition, or generative art. The use of chance as a method of artistic composition is a third technique that grew out of twentieth century modern art movements and originally has its roots in Dada. Marcel Duchamp is credited with pioneering the use of chance in his *3 stoppages etalon*, three pieces in which he held a piece of string over a canvas and then adhered the string to the canvas in whatever pattern it fell. Chance

compositions were also used by other Dada artists, including Jean Arp and Max Ernst, as well as mid-century artists such as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and Lamonte Young (Brecht 7-9). These artists used techniques such as cutting up words and randomly arranging them to create generative poetry and composing music using the *I Ching*. Composition by chance is a technique that can be used to avoid the didactic nature of inserting one's own messages into a piece. When the artist's message is eliminated, the nature of the material can be used to reveal something about itself, often something unexpected. The artist's voice is still present, but it is expressed through the design of rule sets and frameworks for chance occurrences.

Digital technology has brought about a renaissance for chance composition in the form of generative art that utilizes computer algorithms to provide the framework for a piece. For example, *The Postmodernism Generator* is a web-based work that uses a program called the Dada Engine to dynamically generate an academic essay on postmodern theory. The program encodes rules of grammar and structures of academic writing, and then draws from a database of postmodern theoretical language to create such pitch-perfect sentences as "Bataille uses the term 'the precapitalist paradigm of consensus' to denote the absurdity, and some would say the defining characteristic, of modern culture." The believability of the essay combined with the knowledge that it was randomly generated causes the reader to question how much inherent meaning actual postmodern texts have. One is led to think about the way that postmodern theory uses language and what that language actually means. This is the same approach I am taking in algorithmically generating slogans in the *Ad Generator*: the randomness of the generation and the believability (or absurdity) of the slogans is intended to provoke an investigation into the construction of meaning in advertising.

Thus, chance composition, text art, and collage are three techniques developed by avant-garde artists in the twentieth century, yet they are particularly relevant to a contemporary deconstructionist approach to exploring corporate advertising language. These methods are also utilized in and enhanced by newer fields and schools of thought, specifically, information design and anticorporate activism.

## **Information Design and Data Visualization**

While my thesis is strongly influenced by techniques developed by avant-garde art movements, the newer methods of information design and data visualization are also central to my approach. Effective information design is critical to my work in that it can allow viewers to understand patterns and systems of meaning. The goal of information designers is to present data that might be overwhelming or meaningless, and visualize it such that users can process it as information containing meaning and structure. Nathan Shedroff states that:

“An understanding of Information Design starts with the essential view that the vast amount of things that bombard our senses everyday are not pieces of information but merely data...Data is fairly worthless to most of us; it is the product of research or creation (such as writing), but it is not an adequate product for communicating. To have informational value, it must be organized, transformed, and presented in a way that gives it meaning.”  
(Shedroff 268-269)

This approach is particularly useful to my thesis project because people usually see advertisements one at a time, and the ads themselves use information design to encourage a particular interpretation of the images and text, therefore a critical analysis of language patterns is difficult. I intend to use information design and data visualization in order to encourage people to question assumed interpretations and to see patterns in advertising messages that are not usually discernible.

A recent net.art project using data visualization and information design to reveal patterns in meaning is Jonathan Harris's *10 x 10* (fig. 07), described as “an interactive exploration of the words and pictures that define the time” (Harris). *10 x10* consists of a web-based interface that displays a grid of images and a list of words that change every hour. The words are the top 100 keywords from major news sources for that hour, and the images are images from the news that have been tagged with those keywords. The intent is to create an at-a-glance representation of how we represent the important issues in the world at a particular moment.

One of the premises of the project is that words shape our conception of reality, and that displaying words we use to describe our reality will reveal something about our beliefs. Furthermore, Harris takes these words out of the context of sentences and

news articles, where the sense of a single word might be outweighed by the larger context. In this way we are forced to examine the meaning of the specific words we use to think about our world. Similarly, in my thesis, I am extracting words from advertisements, a context in which they seem natural and inevitable, and recontextualizing those words in ways that force the viewer to examine their meaning. In addition, Harris uses a technique similar to the one I am using in the Ad Generator, where he pairs words with images that are tagged with those words. This approach not only forces us to examine the meaning of words, but also how we visually interpret those meanings through imagery.

### **Adbusting, Culture Jamming, and Subvertising**

Finally, my thesis work draws heavily on anticorporate activist traditions of adbusting, culture jamming, and subvertising, three interchangeable terms for the practices of appropriating corporate media and subverting the original messages. The growth of anti-corporate sentiment in the past decade has led to a corresponding growth of artists using advertising media to make political statements. These artists have taken the avant-garde techniques of collage, *détournement*, and text art and used them to create scathing commentaries on corporate power. Naomi Klein, in her writing on anticorporate activism, says that culture jamming “baldly rejects the idea that marketing...must be passively accepted as a one-way information flow”. She describes a “good jam” as “an X-ray of the subconscious of a campaign, uncovering not an opposite meaning but the deeper truth hiding beneath the layers of advertising euphemisms” (Klein 281-282).

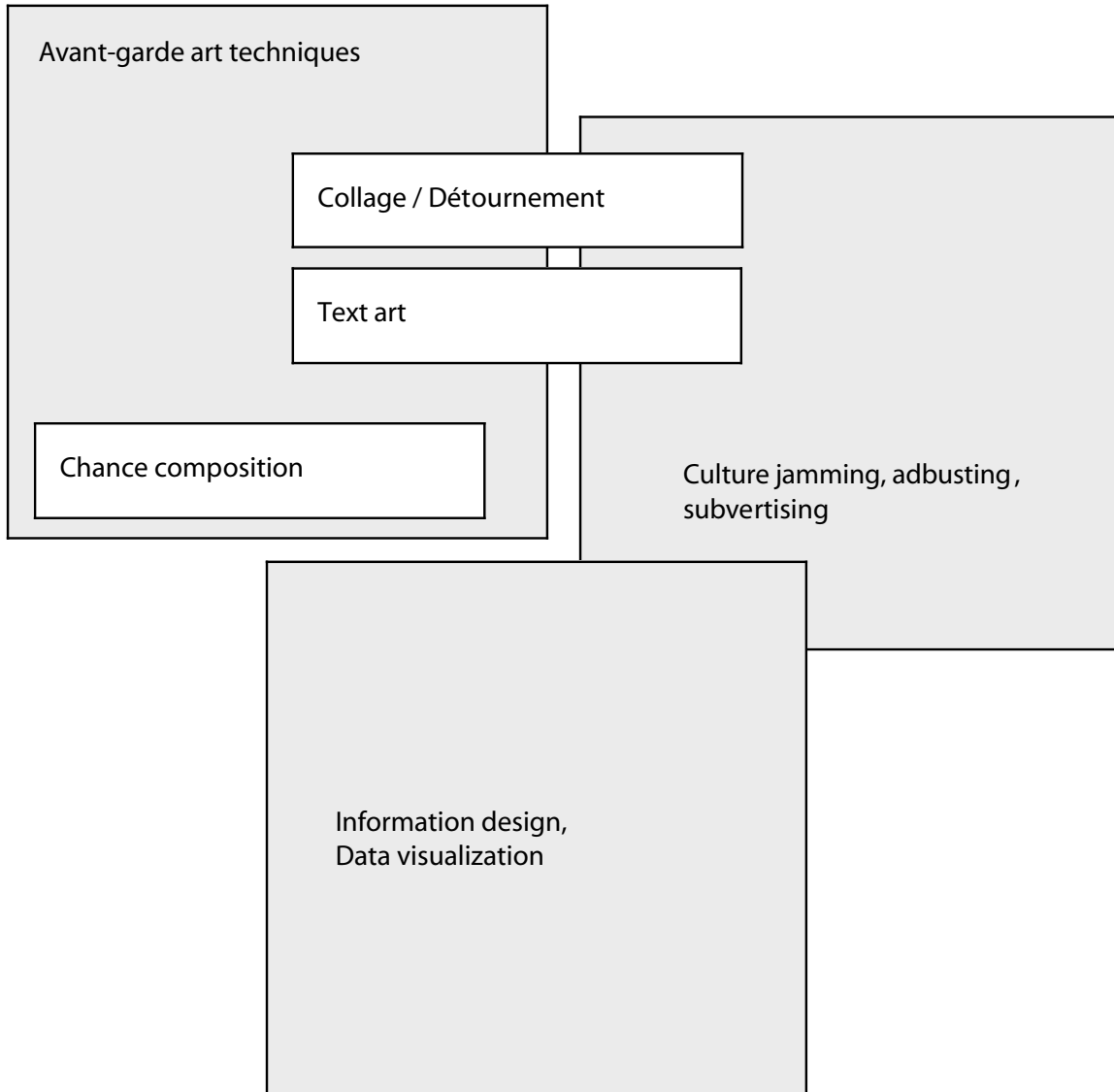
Although adbusting and culture jamming have experienced a resurgence in the past decade with the rise of anticorporate sentiment and the accessibility of technological tools, the tradition has been in existence since the Great Depression, where “Toucher Uppers” modified billboards and photographers like Margaret Bourke-White documented the disjunction between advertising imagery and the rampant poverty of the time (Klein 305). One of the longest-lived contemporary culture-jamming groups is the Billboard Liberation Front, which was formed in 1977 by Jack Napier and Irving Glikk. The BLF “improves” the messages of billboards in public spaces, such as changing the Camel cigarettes billboard to read “Am I Dead Yet?” or altering the Apple Computer ad featuring the Dalai Lama to read “Think Disillusioned” (fig. 08). They argue that since advertising is so ubiquitous and has such a deep effect on us, that we

have a right and responsibility to author the messages that shape our views. This argument – that advertising language shapes our psychological reality – is the basis of my thesis. The BLF manifesto puts it eloquently: “Through the Ad and the intent of the Advertiser we form our ideas and learn the myths that make us into what we are as a people. That this method of self definition displaced the earlier methods is beyond debate. It is now clear that the Ad holds the most esteemed position in our cosmology.” (Napier)

While my work stems from the same frustrations and premises about corporate power, language, and public responsibility that all culture jammers share, I depart from adusting techniques in a significant way. Like Barbara Kruger’s work, adbusters critique ads by inserting their own voice and commentary. While this approach can be effective, it also often comes across as preachy or moralizing. The viewer immediately recognizes what (s)he is being “told” and there is no room for a deeper or more layered experience. By using the elements of advertising to reflect on themselves, rather than inserting my own commentary, and by using chance composition methods, I intend to create works that ask rather than tell, and that invite viewers to engage in the process of interpretation.

As we can see, anticorporate activism relies heavily on the modern art techniques discussed earlier. These techniques – collage, text art, and chance composition – that were central to Cubism, Dada, and Surrealism in the early twentieth century (and later expanded on by groups such as Fluxus and the Situationists) have laid the foundation for many contemporary artists, especially artists who are exploring meaning and semiotics. Collage is effective in examining how the meaning of images or symbols changes when recontextualized; the use of text in (or as) visual art allows for an explicit exploration of language as a system of meaning; and chance composition, or algorithmic art, is a technique that can be used to remove the artist’s explicit “message” and allow materials to reveal their own meaning. These techniques, when paired with the newer fields of information design and data visualization, create a rich and coherent set of tools and methods that can be used to explore language, meaning, and the construction of meaning. My thesis will use these tools in order to reveal underlying patterns in the way language is used in advertising. My work will create an exploratory space where viewers can develop a critical approach to corporate messages and imagery, thereby gaining a greater sense of agency in their relationship with advertising.

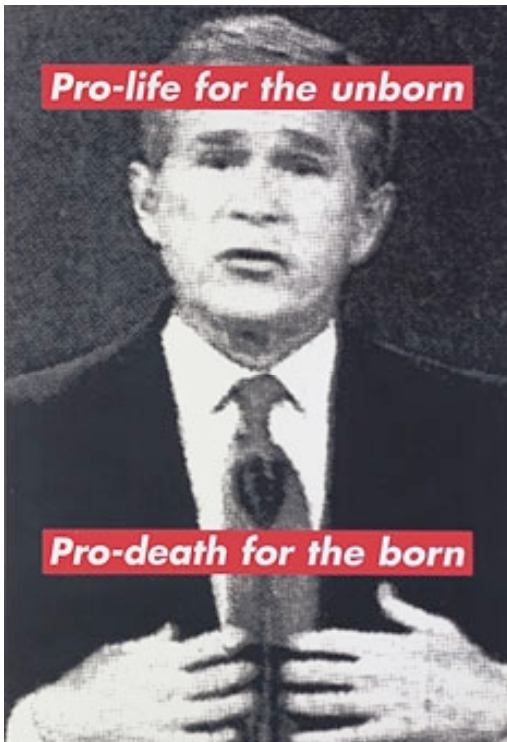
## APPENDIX 01: Domain map



## APPENDIX 02: Images



01. Barbara Kruger, *Your Body is a Battleground*



02. Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*



03. René Magritte, *The Wind and the Song*



04. Kay Rosen, *Pendulum*



05. Kay Rosen, *Yellowish/Reddish*



06. Kay Rosen, *Go Miami/Amigo Miami*

# 10 x 10



07. Jonathan Harris, *10 x 10*



08. Billboard Liberation Front, Apple billboard

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